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ABSTRACT

As part of the process of redefining institutional growth and vitality, the Dallas Community College District is attempting to become a "learning society," that is, an institution which is capable of on-going critical self-examination, which is process-oriented, and which encourages the development of new ideas. The major components involved in achieving this goal are: (1) becoming a community with a strong core of shared values based on behaviors that enhance the work environment, such as trust, honesty, fairness, cooperation, creativity, and risk taking; (2) encouraging staff to become more responsible with respect to their own behaviors; and (3) creating more options and more time for growth using strategies such as setting aside work days during which administrators read, write, and plan for professional growth; using resource consultants to provide logistical support for administrators; developing a comprehensive council structure to encourage grassroots involvement in decision making; and encouraging free-forming groups to pursue innovative and creative activities. As the District personnel focus on their values, become more self-aware, and develop more options for professional growth, they are becoming a community capable of stimulating and supporting each other. "A Commitment Statement of the Dallas Community College District: Organizational Values" is appended. (HB)

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"THE DALLAS QUEST FOR QUALITY: THE COLLEGE BECOMES A LEARNING SOCIETY"

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CHANCELLOR, DCCCD

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THE DALLAS QUEST FOR QUALITY: THE COLLEGE BECOMES
A LEARNING SOCIETY

Let me first, very briefly, describe the Dallas Community College District and give you a measure of our growth, which is comparable in many ways to growth in general in the Dallas area. The Dallas Community College District has 7 campuses; 2 district sites; 800 or so full-time faculty; approximately 50,000 credit students, with an additional non-credit enrollment of 40,000 each semester. We serve a 900 square mile service area that includes 1.6 million residents. Our annual budget is about $100 million, a little over 18% of that made up in local taxes and more than 50% garnered through state appropriations.

Nearly three-fourths of all college freshmen and sophmores who reside in Dallas County and attend college in Texas enroll in our District. Since opening El Centro College in 1966, we have provided educational services for over 1 million students. In the fall of 1966, our enrollment was 4,047. In 1983, our fall enrollment was nearly 50,000. The average age of our students is 27, about equally divided between male and female with about two-thirds of our students attending on a part-time basis.

We serve a burgeoning community. As you know, Dallas is among the cities in the southwest that is "on the move" in almost any way you would choose to measure.

As is true of so many community colleges, we are in a "passage" as an institution, just now. We are redefining what growth and vitality mean. We are no longer opening new colleges. Instead of the quantram leaps of growth we experienced during the first fifteen years of our institution's life, we anticipate gradual growth or a leveling of enrollment. Now we are also finding ways to grow that are more sophisticated and subtle - to grow in our ability to respond to business and industry, for example, or to grow in our ability to provide life-long learning or to use advancing technology to better meet the individual needs of students.

The title of this forum suggests that the Dallas Community College District's goal is to become a learning society. That is an outcome dear to my heart, one we are already in the process of attaining. Certainly, there are a great many difficult tasks in store for an institution seeking to become a learning society. Such an institution must deal effectively with paradox and ambiguity. It must be capable of on-going, critical self-examination. It must be brave enough to take a long, realistic look at where it is and where it needs to be. A learning society is process-oriented. It concentrates an inordinate amount of energy on how things are accomplished. It emphasizes horizontal rather than vertical working relationships. At the same time, it is chock full of idea entrepreneurs who are constantly trying something new, selling a better way, experimenting with the traditional.

As Chancellor, I must ask over and over, "How do we become a learning society?" "How do we learn to grow in these ways?" First and foremost, I expect high quality performance from all of us at work in the District. I also have a fundamental belief that the quality of the work will remain high only if the quality of the work environment is excellent. In other words, it is more difficult for a college to become a learning society if certain basic needs are not being met, if there is not a "comfort zone" provided by the organization which makes the large risks easier and which offers us ways to practice the human skills we need to function as a learning society.

Basically, over the last three years, I have spent a great deal of time with leaders in the organization building this comfort zone and cultivating the human skills we need to become a strong working community -- with a quality work environment. I believe this emphasis enables us to better respond to the challenges facing our District without depleting ourselves, without burning out, with more than enough energy left to risk in ways that will make us a learning society.

If I were describing the process, I would point to these elements:

First, we are becoming a community with a strong core of shared values. To be a real community, there must be a common core of values. In the last year, top leaders within the District have spent much structured time, on retreats and at work sessions -- identifying and clarifying these values. In a nutshell, we have come to say that we value certain behaviors that we believe will make a quality work environment more likely. Then we have defined these behaviors as concretely as we know how. (I have a handout for you which defines them.) They include trust, honesty, fairness, openness, cooperation, creativity, and risk-taking.

By expressing our values in terms of behaviors, we underscore the importance of process. We say we favor processes in our day-to-day work that-

discourage hidden agendas
avoid adversarial relationship
minimize power plays
value deep commitment to our educational mission
make each person responsible for his/her own actions.

The second component of strengthening our work community has been to encourage our staff to become more responsible. If our values are expressed through behaviors, then we must pay attention to our work behaviors and what they implicitly and explicitly say about our work. My hunch has been that our organization sets up behavioral barriers almost inadvertently.

Something pervasive in our work culture encourages us to be more competitive and territorial than we need to be and makes us reluctant at times to be open and trusting.

The strategy we devised to increase personal responsibility was to select an internal consultant who would help make us be more accountable. Dr. Bettie Tully, a professional with great credibility within the District, was released from a portion of her work responsibility for a year to complete a special assignment. During the year she worked primarily among leaders in the District. All of us, beginning with me, were involved in this process work. We learned how to build trust, how to communicate more clearly, how to respect each other even when we disagreed.

Bettie has extended her internal consulting role with us for a second year and continues to increase our self-awareness so that we can make our stated intentions and our actual behaviors more consistent. I like the way Bettie talks about this. Her goal is to increase "pleasure in the process of work." She encourages each of us to empower ourselves to experience pleasure in the process of work.

Another element of strengthening our community has been to create more options, more time for growth where we work. I believe a community is only as strong as it is innovative and creative, only as strong as the options for growth it offers. We have a whole cluster of strategies that seek to offer more options, more time for growth. Several of these strategies include:

Wonderful Wednesday - These are Wednesdays -- about two a month -- scattered throughout the year that have been set aside for administrators to read, write, and plan in ways that provide for their own professional growth. We agree to certain ground rules on these Wednesdays - to keep phone calls to a minimum and not to schedule meetings. After the first year we evalued Wonderful Wednesday and found that 65% of our administrators had actually participated, with almost 90% of those saying that Wonderful Wednesday had had a positive effect on their morale. Ninety-seven percent of those who responded to our evaluation, indicated that they would like to see Wonderful Wednesday continued. To demonstrate the kind of response the practice has generated, let me read this quote from one of the evaluation forms:

> "I have derived a sense of pride in being part of an organization that would entrust me with time to grow professionally and improve my effectiveness. Thanks for the opportunity."

Another strategy is to use resource consultants. We have several district professionals who, as part of their responsibilities, gather information, provide logistical support, and offer food for thought through concept papers, briefings and workshops. They buy leaders time for more creative work. Educational leaders are swamped with information, and to me, it makes sense to have someone sift through mountains of materials to select a few especially relevant ideas or opportunities.

Over the last three years, we have developed a comprehensive council structure as another strategy. The basic format has been to pull together professionals from across the District who perform the same tasks within our institutions. Thus our councils represent all seven colleges and appropriate district units. They meet regularly and are charged with several key responsibilities:

To listen to all employees within their work groups and share ideas, concerns, problems, and solutions;

To communicate what is learned throughout the District;

To problem solve, when problems are raised in their work areas;

To make decisions on matters which directly affect them;

To make recommendations for change when solutions to problems cross work group lines.

Our council structure truly encourages grassroots involvement. It encourages decision-making and responsible action among those who are most directly affected by problems. The council structure is, in essence, designed to empower more and more employees.

As a final strategy, we encourage free-forming groups. Lately, these have formed in growing numbers throughout the District. Such groups encourage members to pursue innovative and creative tasks, to support one another in the risky business of exploration. They get rid of barriers and work on specific projects beyond the range of day-to-day.

One such committee has formed at Richland College. Appropriately, it is called the Uncommittee. The Uncommittee is an interdisciplinary group of administrators and faculty who meet monthly to discuss readings that reflect on those large issues and ideas educators so seldom take time to consider. For example, during the last several months they have read Becker's Denial of Death and Fromm's The Revolution of Hope. They talked about the ways our belief system can both inhibit and liberate us as human beings who also happen to be educators. To my mind, groups like this one are exploring ways to make learning more connected for our students and for us. This is critically important. We live in an interdependent work and our learning experiences must be connected.

These are only a few of the strategies we are working on now.

As we focus on our values, become more self-aware, develop more options for professional growth, we are, in effect, becoming a community capable of stimulating and supporting each other. We are empowering one another, encouraging each other to participate in work in more authentic ways. All of the professionals in our District are free to take initiative , but they also must take responsibility for their initiatives.

I guess I would say that creating such a community, creating such a quality work environment has its risks. There is a good bit of "feistiness" that surfaces. Your colleagues are less likely to let you get away with crazy behavior or with laziness. You find you must be mentally and emotionally present at work. You must stretch yourself. But these are the kinds of demands that become rewards. At least that is what we are finding as we work to become a learning society.

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A COMMITMENT STATEMENT OF THE DALLAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT ORGANIZATION VALUES

We serve students. Their needs and expectations must inform our work. We serve them best by ensuring that the education we provide is of the highest quality. Thus the organizational values which we believe to be important are those which enable us to serve students better.

Realizing that our own high expectations sometimes exceed what is immediately possible in a complex organization, but that providing excellent education is more likely when these expectations are clear, the leadership of the Dallas Community College District holds to these commitments:

We must insist upon excellent performance from ourselves and each employee through:

Clear expectations and evaluation.

Continued professional growth.

Reward and recognition for outstanding achievement.

We must provide a quality work environment for all our employees through:

Work that is meaningful, that is productive, and that encourages individual initiative and offers enjoyment.

Salary, benefits, programs, facilities.

Mutual support for each other and our work groups.

Believing these two tenets to be primary, we therefore assert the following behaviors to be crucial to the achievement of quality in our work:

Mutual Trust: We value each other as persons -- sharing perspectives, accommodating differences, assuming motives are trustworthy. This quality undergirds the others.

Honesty: We speak and act truthfully, without hidden agenda -- saying when we make mistakes or do not know, keeping commitments, avoiding silence when it may be misleading.

Fairness: We treat each other justly -- applying rules with equity, providing opportunity based on qualifications, giving each other the benefit of the doubt.

Considerate, Open Communications: We share information, ideas, and feelings -- listening carefully, speaking forthrightly, respecting opinions of colleagues.

Cooperation: We work together to achieve common goals -- looking beyond self-interest, remaining helpful in difficult situations, encouraging compromise and positive change.

Creativity: We value originality and vision -- freeing professionals to try something new, expecting follow through, using ideas that work.

Responsible Risk-taking: We respond well to challenges -- considering carefully, acting although uncertainties remain, moving forward in spite of possible criticism.

Because these commitments and behaviors are of great significance, we hold them as essential to our task as educators, and we hold ourselves and all the Dallas Community College District staff accountable to achieve them.

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